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# D'HANIS



CORNELIA

CROOK





# The Story of D'Hanis, Tex.



By  
Cornelia Crook

Illustrated By  
ALICE NAYLOR





**D**'Hanis was settled during the waning days of the Texas Republic. The young nation was struggling to build up its resources and at the same time balance a public debt that had reached skyrocketing proportions. With a population of scarcely more than 40,000, excluding the Indians, Texas could afford to be generous with its vast lands. In 1841 a bill passed Congress authorizing colonial contracts and grants. Under this law, Southwest Texas gained many hardy artisans and a surprising number of distinguished professional men through the European emigration efforts of Prince Solms, a German, and Henri de Castro, a Frenchman.

**H**enri de Castro, the colonizer of Medina County, was a Semite by heritage and a Frenchman by birth. He became a nationalized citizen of the United States when he came in 1827 as consul for the Kingdom of Naples to Providence, Rhode Island. Fourteen years later Castro was sent to Texas as a representative of the banking firm of Lafitte and Company of Paris, to help reintroduce the Franco-

Texiana bill into the Texas Congress. He failed in this undertaking but was successful in personal matters. In less than a week after his arrival in Texas, President Houston had appointed him Consul-General from the Republic of Texas to the Kingdom of France, and at the same time granted him a colonization contract for a large tract of land situated four miles west of the Medina river. Later he bought from private parties the land up to the Medina, thereby securing frontage on this running stream of water.

**T**ravel being both tedious and dangerous at that time, Mr. Castro returned to the east and went on to Europe without viewing his allotted land, which was on the extreme Western Frontier with no protection from hostile Mexico and wily Indians who plundered the territory. Castro was primarily a financier, and he went about his colonization with grandiose plans of personal gain and glory. When these plans later became arduous and appallingly costly he proved through his untiring efforts to be warmly humane, if at times extremely fallible.

**O**ver a five year period, Castro and his agents gathered industrious workers from European countries. His first colony, Castroville, was founded in 1844. In 1845 and 1846 the colonies of Quihi and Vandenburg were established. D'Hanis, his

fourth and last colony, was started in 1847 and named in honor of Guillaume (William) D'Hanis, a Frenchman who was manager of the colonization company in France. The nucleus of the D'Hanis colony was Alsatian.

**7** he Alsatian people derived their background from both the right and the left bank of the Rhine river. They were Frenchman by birth, but spoke a German dialect, and were staunch Catholics. Alsace and Lorraine, while often linked together in history, have always been two separate entities, and in 1840 they were governed by the French, but had their separate Dukes. Not until 1871 did they become a part of Germany, although Alsace since the fifth century had been populated by a Teutonic race. While the French conquests of the 17th century had modified this element, the Teutonic influence was still predominant. The educated classes spoke French, while the masses used the German dialect as their native tongue.

**7** he year before the settlement of D'Hanis, Castro agents embarked eleven boat loads of emigrants from European ports to Galveston. After traveling the troublesome journey from the coast overland to San Antonio, many families who had not already dropped out chose to remain in San Antonio or to go to less isolated sections of Texas. The 29



Alsatian and Roman Catholic families who gathered in Castroville for their final destination might have come from Europe on any one of the eleven boats. While Castro was second only to Stephen F. Austin in the number of families brought to Texas, only a small number of the people he brought over actually took possession of their grants.

**C**harles de Montel had been hired by Castro to survey a town site on clear-flowing Parker Creek, two miles east of the Arroya Seco. The rough hills of the Balcones Fault Zone level into the rolling Rio Grande Plains north of the site. Castroville was to be their nearest neighbor, twenty-five miles to the east. On the west was a vast wild frontier.

**T**heodore Gentilz, a noted early Texas artist, was chosen to point out the way to these people. No group could have been less prepared for the life they were to encounter. The path leading from Castroville was hardly discernible, and their provisions were pitifully inadequate. They had no knowledge of frontier country, since it was a complete contrast to their former way of life. However, what they lacked in knowledge and equipment was made up in fortitude. After two years of neglect, severe poverty and suffering, the colony began to prosper. As hardy Germans and Texas Rangers moved in to add their strength to the

settlement, the little village was well on its way to becoming a pioneer town of distinction.

**T**he first houses were crude dwellings, little more than hovels, fashioned from short mesquite pickets which grew in the valley near the Seco. Overhanging roofs were covered with long grasses of the prairie, and more grass or clay mortar was worked in and out of the spaces between the poles. The floors were made of beaten earth.

**A**s the colony prospered they built their houses after the ones they had left in Europe. Stone was the most available material, and while the houses were sturdy and well-built, they were unsuited to the Texas climate. The small attic rooms under a low roof were reminiscent of France, but they were almost uninhabitable during the hot Texas summer. Windows were too few and too small to entice the summer breezes. Nevertheless, the houses were a constant reminder to the transplanted Europeans of their homeland.

**T**he original site of D'Hanis is now a ghost town and is called "Old D'Hanis" to distinguish it from the newer settlement. The most picturesque sight in Old D'Hanis is the ruins of St. Dominic's church,

with crumbling stone walls supporting Gothic windows that look down on the first burial ground, where both French and German headstones mark the graves of people who were born in the seventeenth century.

**M**any of the century-old houses are in ruins. Only a few are still occupied and in their original state. The old Jean Ney house that once served as a coach inn and stopping place for the mail carriers from San Antonio to El Paso is of rock construction, with recessed windows and doors and a covered porch running the length of the house. It is not difficult to visualize teamsters and soldiers sprawling on the shaded porch after a hard day in the saddle, swapping yarns of their hair-raising experiences on the early Texas trails. Incidentally, Jean Ney was a nephew of Napoleon's famous field marshall, Michel Ney, who was executed in 1815.

**O**ne of the oldest houses in the town has been remodeled, so that its original state is not recognizable. But inside this house is a room with a crumbling fireplace, where the early Catholic nuns conducted the first school in D'Hanis. Today the two daughters of one of the original settlers, John Rudinger, live in this house in which they were born almost a century ago. It was their father who helped



cut and carve the stones used in the building of St. Dominic church. He also carved many of the headstones in the old cemetery. In back of the Rudinger house is a well preserved barn. It was built out of hand hewn logs, which are dovetailed together in a manner to delight an artist.

**7**wo miles from D'Hanis is the site of old Fort Lincoln, one of a chain of forts built for protection from Indians by the United States government after Texas became a state in the Union. It was named for Captain George Lincoln, an officer killed in the battle of Buena Vista, Mexico. Major James Longstreet, who became one of the South's great Civil War generals, commanded the post. It was here that Richard Dodge — a chronicler and authority on the American Indian — came immediately after his graduation from West Point.

**A**fter three years the post had served its purpose and was abandoned. Its buildings were occupied from time to time by D'Hanisites, but today only a low rock wall remains of the original fort buildings. A lonely Texas Centennial marker stands guard to recall the historical significance of the spot.

**7** here are a few weathered ranch houses of distinction in the immediate vicinity of D'Hanis.

Adjoining Fort Lincoln on the Seco creek is the old Louis Rothe house, which dominated the site of one of the largest ranches in Medina county. It is a prime example of early Texas architecture. Its thick rock walls are as strong today as they were when it was built, over a hundred years ago.

**A**bout a mile to the east of the Rothe ranch is another rock house built by a German, Franz Joseph Poerner. This house has been modernized inside, but retains its traditional German lines on the outside. It is inhabited today and is a comfortable and attractive dwelling.

**A**nother Poerner-built house is located on Highway 90, on the right of the railroad tracks, about a mile before entering D'Hanis from the east. This dwelling is one of the most typical examples of colonial French architecture in Texas, and the house is well known to historians and architects for its beauty of line and antiquity.

**I**t is a saying in D'Hanis that a train whistle accomplished what Comanche Indians and droughts failed to do. It forced the town to move. In 1881 the Southern Pacific railroad missed the

village by a few miles. As a result, the people gradually moved their businesses and houses closer to the train station.

**T**he most distinguishing feature of present day D'Hanis is its brick yard. One can find bricks stamped D'Hanis over all South Texas. Before fine roads and automobiles became commonplace, D'Hanis served a large community of farmers and ranchers. Today it is not unlike many other small Texas towns. Its red brick buildings cluster around a small, quaint station, where the trains slow down but seldom stop. It has a fine school that serves the children in the community and a Catholic Church, noted for its beautiful stained glass windows. Since the population is predominantly Catholic, the church serves as the center of the social life of the town.

**I**t is Old D'Hanis, basking in the Texas sun with its skeleton walls rising from the weeds, that whispers to those who will listen of vanished days — days when hardships were overcome by the courageous spirits of humble strangers who blazed a toil-worn trail to make their cultural contribution to Texas.











*Early Merchants at D'Hanis*

(Copied from Records in Medina Court House)

**MARRELL, FRANCIS**

September 1, 1849 to March 1, 1850

License to sell goods, wares and etc. Liquors by quart

**FINGER, JOSEPH (I)**

September 5, 1849 to January 5, 1850

License to sell liquor by the quart

**NEY, NICOLAS**

October 6, 1849 to February 6, 1850

License to sell goods, wares and liquors by quart

**MARRELL & MAHARG**

June 15, 1851 to September 1, 1852

License to sell goods, liquor at retail

**WEBER, PETER**

May 1, 1852 to September 1, 1852

License to sell goods and liquor by quart

**NEY, JOSEPH**

January 16, 1854 to May 16, 1854

License to sell liquor by quart and goods and etc.

**SCHREIBER, JOHN**

July 7, 1856 to November 7, 1856

License to sell liquor by quart and goods

**ENDERLE, FIDEL**

September 9, 1856 to March 9, 1857

License to sell liquor by quart and goods

**WIPFF, SEBASTIAN**

October 1, 1858 to February 1, 1859

License to sell liquors by quart and goods



## *List of D'Hanis Postmasters*

Postoffice Established on June 24, 1854

### POSTMASTERS

### DATE OF APPOINTMENTS

Henry Joseph Richarz.....	June 24, 1854
Joseph Ney.....	September 10, 1860
John Fohn.....	April 10, 1866
Judson G. Fry.....	April 10, 1883
Maurice P. Twomey.....	April 1, 1893
Mathias S. Koch.....	October 9, 1899
Clyde L. Hake.....	March 29, 1901
John F. Beckmeyer.....	June 24, 1902
Charles F. Luckenbach.....	March 2, 1903
Clara Gilbert.....	August 14, 1914
Alphonse Boog.....	June 22, 1921

















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N. MANCHESTER,  
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